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ABSTRACT

The decision to organize English 112 courses around a research project entitled "A Survey of the Freshman Composition Requirement at Richmond Area Colleges and Universities" resulted from concerns as the fall of 1993 approached. English 112 emphasizes the study of literature and the production of a research paper that presents an argument by paraphrasing information in books and periodicals. Since the instructor himself has an aversion to writing this type of perfunctory paper, he assumed that his students would have the same aversion. In an article, Richard L. Larson argues that the concept of a research paper has no substantive identity, that is, it is impossible to differentiate between texts that incorporate and evaluate new information and those that do not. In the composition classroom, a research paper is any attempt by writers to gather information for themselves, the world, or others as they make meaning for a purpose. What is the purpose of Freshman English but to prepare students to be self-critically aware as they revise their discourse for a variety of audiences and purposes. With these considerations in mind, a research project was devised that would involve the entire class and serve a real purpose. That project raised important questions such as: (1) what qualifies a researcher as competent? (2) what is the role of students as researchers and writers? and (3) how can educators rethink information literacy so that they can kill the mistaken perception of the so-called research or terminal paper? (TB)

INFORMATION LITERACY: REAL WRITERS. REAL RESEARCH

(A paper presented at 1995 4C's meeting in Washington, DC)

by Patrick Tompkins

Today I assume a two fold purpose for my presentation:

Informative and didactic (or if you prefer, argumentative). I would like to inform you of my assumptions which provided the foundation for this particular writing curriculum and further inform you of the outcomes of this pedagogy. And, I will frame my appeal with an argument that we broaden our understanding of information literacy in the composition classroom beyond the concept of the traditional so-called research or term (that's short for "terminal") paper.

The decision to organize these ENG 112 courses around a research project entitled "A Survey of the Freshman Composition Requirement at Richmond Area Colleges and Universities resulted from the confluence of two issues which danced against the conscious background of my thoughts during the Fall of 1993 and my forethoughts of the ever impending next semester.

The first issue related to the stated curriculum requirements at John Tyler Community College. Our Eng 112 course emphasizes the study of literature and the production of a research paper which presents an argument by paraphrasing information found in books and at least 5 magazines, two of which must be professional journals, or some such, and which adheres to MLA or APA guidelines for citing sources.

Yet I have a personal aversion to what I call the terminal paper, terminal because the

writing and reading of these texts often induces meditations upon death in both students and instructors. My aversion derives from my professional training as well as my personal experience.

As a relatively new member of the profession, I have been trained in the type of process pedagogy and social constructivist linguistic theory which argues that the traditional so-called research paper represents a static and linear understanding of tasks such as information gathering, evaluation and synthesis, and the way educated members of society make meaning and participate in discourse communities.

From my personal experience as a student I recall how I felt my own research papers represented rote-learning and much tedious work that yielded few benefits for myself as a writer or person and which seemed to have no purpose beyond assigning me a grade and checking to make sure I didn't plagiarize.

From this experience I infer that many of our students have similar aversions to writing these texts. As a writing instructor, the thought of reading a paper on Poe's "Berenice," or WWII or even what we should do about welfare reform nauseates me, makes me anxious with what some might call fear and loathing. Too often, this library or even interview researched text merely repeats incomplete or poorly understood information, fails to provide students with a broad and reliable understanding of the subjects they investigate, and offers little in enabling students to improve their writing.

In working through this issue I referred to conversations with colleagues, especially at Virginia Commonwealth University and written texts on the subject. In Richard L Larson's 1982 article "The Research Paper in the Writing Course: A Non-Form of Writing," I found a

discussion which helped clarify my thinking.

Larson assures his audience that he does not oppose nor deny the significance of research in the creation of text. Nor do I. But Larson argues that we need to reexamine the traditional so-called research paper and what it is we think students need to know and should be able to do as they process information in their texts.

Larson argues that as a concept the research paper has no substantive identity, that is, it is impossible to differentiate between texts that incorporate and evaluate new information (research) and texts which do not. Not only does research refer to bocks and interviews, not only to experiments and statistics, but also to any attempt by a writer to gather information from themselves, the world or others as they make meaning for a purpose.

Please allow me to repeat: research in the composition classroom is: any attempt by a writer to gather information from themselves, the world or others as they make meaning for a purpose.

Furthermore, Larson says the research paper has no procedural validity, that is, there is no one MLA or APA or what have you, no single way to go about gathering information, nor is there a single type of source of information that we can identify. Indeed, most of us are not qualified to instruct students in many research endeavors, such as how to devise a valid scientific experiment, or how to develop a reliable questionnaire, or how to effectively psychoanalyze a subject and report our findings.

These are discipline specific research skills, every bit as relevant -- perhaps more so -- than library research, and they are skills, which as I have said most of us do not possess the certification nor experience to responsibly instruct. We do our students a disservice, Larson

says, when we misrepresent and too much narrow our definition of researching and incorporating information in discourse.

SO, when we say we want our students to create texts which incorporate information in a meaningful way, what is it exactly that we mean?

Surely we do not think the literature or library research paper prepares students for all information gathering processes, nor can we credibly argue that it prepares our students for the kinds of information processing and writing activities they will engage in most frequently when they exit the composition sequence -- whether they enter the work force or continue their various studies.

Here is my own assumption: the objective of the freshman composition sequence including the research component is to prepare students to be self-critically aware as they revise their discourse for a variety of audiences and purposes.

Let me repeat that: the objective of the freshman composition sequence is to prepare students to be self-critically aware as they revise their discourse for a variety of audiences and purposes.

This discourse occurs now in an ever more educated society where the word "information" has supplanted "labor" as our communal mantra.

So the first question occupying my thoughts in 1993 was: How can I best provide students with the information literacy requisite for performance and achievement in an increasingly "technical" society?

The second issue underscoring this project resulted from the efforts of our English faculty to evaluate and revise our objectives and outcomes for our curriculum.

As we shared our personal visions for what students should know and be able to do, we naturally wanted to prepare our students for their endeavors after they leave our school -- most of our students transfer to four-year schools and/or most of our students achieve degree certificates in a trade or profession, and/or most of our students want to strengthen their personal and resume skills.

Will the traditional so-called research paper serve this diversity?

In short we want our curriculum to be portable, that is, to provide relevant knowledge and skills that students can carry with them. Particularly regarding other institutions, we are concerned not only with credit transfer but also with the portability of writing skills for students in diverse disciplines.

My own perspective as well as the individual perspectives of my colleagues were significantly colored by our professional training, our experience at other institutions, and our conversations with educators in our region and elsewhere. Our information, then, while diverse and interesting, was largely anecdotal: "When I taught at..." or "I have a friend who teaches at RIP U and she says they..."

Thus, the second issue that I considered in the Fall of 93 was what objectives and outcomes have colleges and universities in our area established for their composition sequences. I felt that if we had reliable and comprehensive information about this, the English faculty could better revise our own curriculum in conjunction with, in spite of, in accordance or opposition to other curriculums.

But we didn't have this information, and gathering it would require time and resources not at our disposal. This is how the confluence of two questions question 1 -- how to teach

information literacy -- and question 2 -- what are the objectives and outcomes for the composition sequences of other institutions -- generated the research project these students participated in.

While Katherine Boykin has provided her perspective on the project, let me add my own thoughts about the benefits derived from our work and the problems we encountered.

First, I must say that on the second day of the class when I presented the students with my proposal for our semester's work, I was much more nervous speaking to them than i am speaking to you here today, mostly because I do not know y'all very well, yet I would have to spend 16 weeks with these students.

I was anxious because I knew that once I committed our classes to this project our curriculum for the semester -- whether good or bad -- would be difficult to significantly revise or even abandon. More importantly, I worried that students would be uninterested in the project and would not see the relevance of composition research to them or their writing.

Initially students were indeed surprised and unsure about the potential benefits of our project, but there was also an immediate underlying enthusiasm in their response as well. I have come to believe that they were intrigued by the fact that this information was necessary and vital to the work of the English faculty and the reconceptualization of the students' own composition curriculum. As well, I think they felt validated knowing that this information did not already exist in a coherent or comprehensive form, that they were not merely repeating what someone else has already said, and that the end product would not be read, graded in red ink, and subsequently discarded by instructor or student, but that the results of their information gathering would be read, referred to and perhaps utilized by other people who actually cared about this

information.

The research of Daly, Miller and many others clearly demonstrates that motivation influences the quality of education; thus, I feel comfortable concluding that student interest in the project must have positively effected how much and how well they learned in the course.

The specific educational benefits are considerable. Some are obvious, such as the well documented skills acquired through student participation in discourse communities and collaborative learning, the latter of which worked particularly well with the diverse community college population.

Participants in this project ranged from 18 to 60 years of age, and consisted of office professionals, semi-retired persons, military personnel, parents, even a missionary. These are busy people with an abundance of talent and life experience.

The group work provided the flexibility for task and time sharing essential for community college students, and it allowed each writer to contribute their own professional and personal strengths to the process while at the same time learning from the skills others had already acquired.

Because students reviewed current literature on the subject, wrote summaries and business letters, developed questionnaires, reported to each other, to me and to a larger professional audience on our process and findings, they gained that experience which undergirds what I mentioned is part of my assumption about freshman composition, that students be prepared to revise texts for a variety of purposes and audiences.

However, to my mind the most significant educational benefit was cognitive, or more accurately meta-cognitive. I also noted earlier that my assumption about the objective for

composition courses is to develop self-critical awareness in writers. This project fostered that meta-cognition on three increasingly more complex levels.

First, students engaged in self-critical analysis as they wrote their midterm and final portfolios in which they evaluated what they learned as writers and how they participated in the group work. Katherine's paper today, for example, represents a submission in her final portfolio for which she was asked to review the project and her education throughout the semester.

On a second, more complex level, because John Tyler CC, our school, was one of the subjects of the survey, students became aware of what the college sees as the objectives and outcomes for the course in which these students were enrolled.

As we reviewed information provided for our survey, we discussed the goals of our own course work, and I must admit that more than one student asked me why we weren't reading dramatic works as described in John tyler documents or asked the location of the non-existent writing and learning centers our faculty chair said the college provides to students.

And on the third, most global level, as students reviewed the national literature and the information yielded from their survey, they became self-critically aware of how their participation in JT's writing course did or did not correspond to the understanding of composition and rhetoric pedagogy in the profession at large.

The benefits to my own education were similarly remarkable. While I can't detail all of them here today, I'd like to emphasize the most significant one as I see it.

I learned to trust students more, to trust the knowledge and experience and diversity which they bring to the course from day one -- our student population represents many valuable educational resources for instructors rather than merely empty or poorly formed vessels.

In respecting students as experienced and intelligent adults, what i learned, and what pleases me greatly, is that the conclusions these students reached in their survey differed from both my expectations before we undertook the project and perhaps even the conclusions I would personally draw from the same information now.

Thus, I was reminded once again of the Eisenberg's uncertainty principle, that measurement depends upon the position of the observer as much as the so-called reality of the event or substance.

I learned too how our students perceive our pedagogy and our professional discourse. In short, I think they recognize that our conversation is ongoing and fluid, that it is sometimes more heterogeneous than homogeneous.

Some students would go so far as to argue that we have a cacophony or chaos of voices while more generous students may note that our pedagogy exists along a broad, gradual continuum like the process-product model addressed by Katherine and Mary Braxton.

Also from this late perspective, I can identify several significant weaknesses and problems, almost all of which can be at least partially attributed to a need on my part for a clearer conception of and better organization for the project.

Our survey, quite frankly, was too ambitious. We sought too much information and tried to process it meaningfully and responsibly with too little available time and resources. If I revisited this survey now, I would limit the scope of our final goal and the information we gather.

Because my conception for the project was too ambitious we all, students and myself, felt overtaxed and frantic throughout the semester. We had to work diligently inside and outside

of class to conceive, create and revise this 50 some page document.

Our written report, which I should say now I regard as significant and am proud of,

Still, our written report thus could have been more fluid in its expression, more unified in its goals and conclusions and more reliable in its findings. As with all research, our survey does not contain the final word on freshman composition in the Richmond area, and indeed I am certain we have inadvertently misrepresented some aspects of some institutions' composition programs.

Remember too, though, that these inaccuracies or misrepresentations can result not only from weakness on the part of we as researchers, but also from unreliable or inaccurate or incomplete information provided by the institutions surveyed.

Another problem, though I have cited it above as a benefit, related to group work. Most groups and individuals worked well together and took advantage of having more than one person to think, write, revise and carry the water bucket. However, at least two groups totally self-destructed -- members dropped out, failed to perform adequately, or developed a dislike or distrust of other members.

I have since recognized the necessity for more proactive monitoring of group work and dynamics on the part of the instructor. Still, these experiences were not wholly without value as we all here recognize many careers require collaborative work and some groups achieve greater success and unity than other groups.

In a sense, then, our experience in the classroom served as a relatively accurate reflection of our experience in the professional world.

Just as I do not believe our survey provides the last or best word on our subject, neither

do I believe that this particular curriculum offers the only, the best, or even the necessary pedagogy for all second semester composition courses, nor perhaps even for my own courses.

But I do believe that this project raises important questions posed by our evolving understanding of what it means to be educated and what knowledge and skills will best prepare students for success in this new information society, Mr. Gingrich's third wave, if you will pardon my language.

These questions:

- What qualifies one as a competent researcher, and what implications does this hold for our understanding of reliability and validity?

- What is the role of students as researchers and writers, particularly those who have already engaged in professional information gathering and who are non-traditional in terms of age and background?

- How can we rethink information literacy so that we can kill once and for all the mistaken perception on the part of our students which is fostered by too narrow an understanding on the part of many of our instructors with regard to the traditional so-called research or terminal paper.

My argument is that we have a professional obligation to continually update our curriculum in response to the changing needs of our culture and our students.

We must kill the terminal paper and provide students with portable skills, a meta-

cognitive awareness of writing and information processing which they can draw upon as they proceed through their educational and professional lives after the composition course ends.

This is Information Literacy.

Information Literacy: Real Writers. Real research.